

The male trailing spouse: Enter the AMP

A century ago, gender roles for expatriating couples were clear: the husband was breadwinner, the wife cared for home and children. Today, this is no longer a given. Over the past 20 years, for an increasing number of couples moving abroad, the wife becomes the breadwinner, and the husband takes charge of child-rearing and household.

BY GARY FISHBEIN

Ever-changing roles

We're steeped in the paradigm of working husband and housewife. Most of us have internalized it without realizing, by observing our families of origin. It's modelled to us in almost all aspects of our culture. Feminism helped society redefine women entering the professional sphere as not only laudable, but necessary. By comparison, few positive images of men managing households and childcare exist in western culture. For the most part, a househusband is seen as comical at best; emasculated at worst.

An international move requires much of any trailing spouse. One must create a home; navigate an unfamiliar culture, that's usually conducted in a foreign language; build a social support system in this new environment; and see to the wellbeing of all family members expatriating with them.

In our professional lives, we often develop friendship circles of like-minded individuals. Out of the workforce, there's no such opportunity for a trailing spouse. To this, add the isolation and limited social support of crossing gender lines, and we begin to understand the position of a male trailing spouse.

As the word "trailing" carries a whiff of subservience, and "partner" is more inclusive and egalitarian, for this article I use the term *accompanying male partner*, or AMP.

Table for one

Although AMPs are usually well educated and socially evolved, they're often poorly prepared for the emotional implications of their choice to put their career on hold in favour of a partner's. In a world where the question "What do you do?" translates as "Who are you?", an AMP's sense-of-self is put to the test.

It's difficult for an AMP to find social support geared to his needs. Although programmes and organisations for expat spouses exist, they're usually focused »

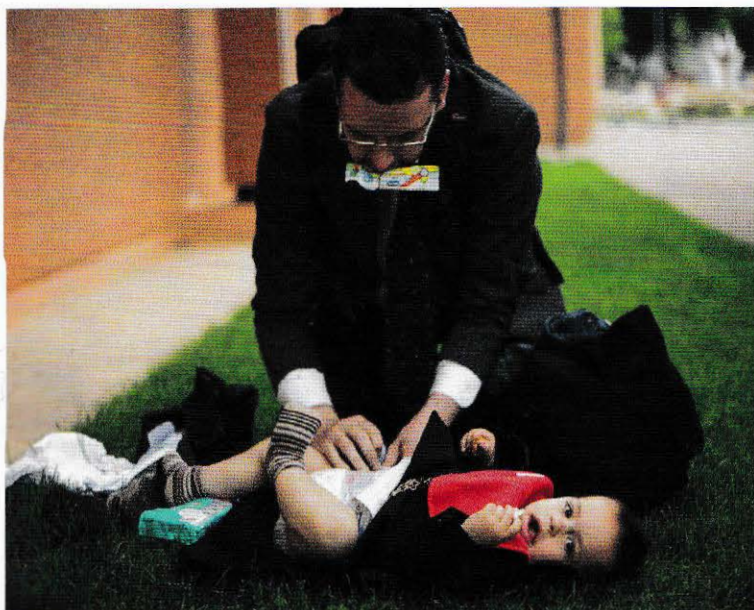


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on women. The topics of their meetings don't often interest men, who rarely feel comfortable (or even welcome). One AMP described being shunned in such a group, sponsored by his wife's employer. As the only man, he seated himself alone at a table. No one joined him, but other attendees took the remaining empty chairs from his table for use elsewhere.

Expat mothers usually are responsible for their children's education. Fathers are a comparatively rare breed at school events and meetings. Their presence can be disquieting to the women. An AMP father in my practice disclosed that he's never been invited for a play-date for his son. Yet, when his wife attends at school, she often receives invitations.

... being an AMP can be transforming. AMPs are trailblazers in the evolving geography of gender roles.

It's also challenging for AMPs to develop friendships with other men. Between them can hang an unspoken sense that the AMP is somehow louche, weak, stupid, or lazy. An AMP, with self-esteem already challenged, may begin to believe this of himself.

Big adjustments as a couple

Gender role-reversals can create issues for couples. A working female may resent her partner's apparent leisure, or growing closeness with their children. An AMP may resent his partner's interesting professional life, with opportunities for adult interaction. He may also find financial dependence on his partner difficult to adjust to. It's essential for expat couples to take the time and make the effort to communicate about difficult issues like these. If communication breaks down within a couple, it's well-advised to

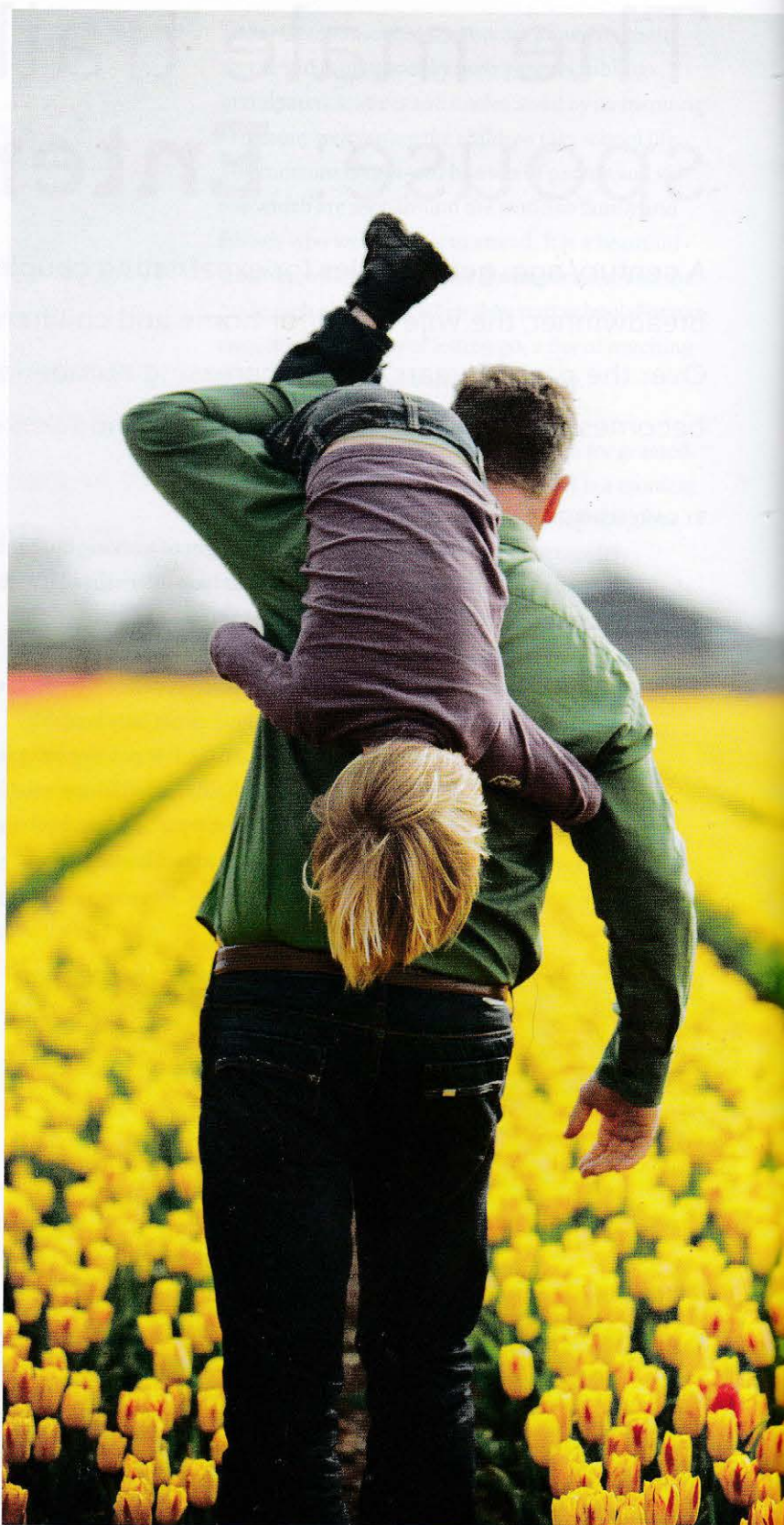


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get outside help from a marital counsellor. Keep in mind, the most common cause for premature termination of expat postings is marital dissatisfaction.

Sense of purpose

Finding meaningful pursuits is crucial for any expat partner. Career-minded AMPs who have employment in their host-countries generally fare better than their nonworking brethren. However, it's important to research options and begin networking as early as possible—even before expatriating. Things may not fall into place quickly, so patience is advised. Flexibility about working at a lower level of employment and salary widens the field of possibility. Imagination and creativity to find a different profession altogether may also prove rewarding. In any case, international work experience impresses on a CV.

Many AMPs take advantage of free time by earning career-enhancing academic degrees. Some acquire degrees to change careers. Two men in my practice have been ordained into the clergy. Others take opportunities to study whatever interests them; gain proficiency at skills they find rewarding; start businesses; turn to artistic endeavours; become more physically fit; or do volunteer work. Any of these options provides an AMP with opportunities to meet the like-minded, enrich their expat experience, and bolster self-esteem. Finding ways of meeting other AMPs is essential. It's most important to not become isolated.

Not the strong, silent type

Men are culturally-freighted with an additional burden of having to be singular, strong and silent. To give voice to sadness, fear or disappointment is considered weakness. We've been exhorted since childhood to go it alone, and to not be a "cry-baby". Most of us, at least on a conscious level, have moved beyond this, yet there remains a lingering internalized injunction keeping us from reaching out in times of need. It's necessary to recognize this attitude as non-adaptive, standing in the way of getting much-needed support.

Lacking support groups

Support groups specifically geared toward AMPs in the Netherlands are not available, unfortunately. However, Clara Wiggins has an informative, supportive website for male and female expat partners (expatpartnersurvival.com) that I highly recommend. There's a group in Brussels, aptly named *Spouses Trailing Under Duress Successfully* (STUDS) that has a blog (studsbelgium.blogspot.nl). They're an informal international social support group emphasizing AMPs, with women also welcome. See especially their news pages for related articles and advice. Perhaps an enterprising AMP in the Netherlands can establish a branch here.

For more about the changing roles of fathers specifically, read "[Fatherhood in the 21st century](#)" by Stephen Davies in the Spring 2015 edition of *ACCESS Magazine*. Stephen, also a member of the ACCESS Counselling Service Network, runs a workshop on this topic through his practice.

Sometimes, an AMP's issues become too much to handle alone. The experience can unexpectedly elicit psychological issues, inducing anxiety and depression. It can become necessary for an AMP to seek out professional psychological help. A therapist can help an AMP to see himself and his circumstances from a more adaptive perspective, challenging unhelpful, deep-seated beliefs. There are a number of expat therapists in the Netherlands who are well-equipped to assist AMPs who find adjustment difficult here. Several are members of the ACCESS Counselling Service Network.

Transformation in adventure

It's not all doom and gloom for the AMP. In fact, the experience of being an AMP can be transforming. AMPs are trailblazers in the evolving geography of gender roles. Their unconventional choice challenges them to experience life from a different perspective, and offers the adventure of living abroad, experiencing new cultures. Leaving our comfort-zones affords us opportunities for learning and personal growth. So raise your AMPerage! «

About the author

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